

John Geiger House  
(Audubon House)  
205 Whitehead Street  
Key West  
Monroe County  
Florida

HABS No. FL-177

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
JOHN GEIGER HOUSE  
(Audubon House)

HABS No. FL-177

Location: 205 Whitehead Street, Key West, Monroe County, Florida.

Key West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse  
Mercator Coordinates: 17.418340.2716090.

Present Owner: Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell Wolfson  
5030 North Cay Road  
Miami Beach, Florida.

Present Occupant: Mr. and Mrs. George Stone.

Present Use: Residence.

Significance: A fine example of a mid-nineteenth century town house of Key West built by one of the best known of Key West's pilots and wrecking masters, Captain John Geiger.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Not known, but probably in the 1850s.
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: In 1829 an agreement between the four proprietors of Key West was reached for the division of the Island. Lot 3, Square 15, on which this building stands, was granted to one of the partners, Pardon C. Greene of Newport, Rhode Island (Deed Book A, p. 145). That same year Greene leased his residence on Lot 3, Square 15, to Ellen Mallory, mother of Stephen R. Mallory, later to become Secretary of the Confederate Navy (Deed Book A, p. 171). In 1831 this property is described as having a one-story frame building occupied as a dwelling by Dr. B.B. Strobel and two small houses, one a kitchen and the other an apothecary shop (Deed Book A, p. 280). Dr. Strobel, a native of Charleston, S.C., is mentioned by Audubon in his account of his visit to Key West. After Greene's death this lot and other of his property was sold by the Marshal to satisfy his creditors. At that sale in 1844 John Geiger purchased 2/3 of Lot 3, including the site of this building (Deed Book C, p. 395-397). The Geiger heirs retained this property until 1958 when it was purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell Wolfson (Deed Book 128, p. 266-267). (Deed from Geiger heirs to Mitchell Wolfson Foundation June 20, 1958, Monroe County Courthouse Records).

4. Original plan and construction: A two-and-a-half story, frame house with a two story veranda across the long dimensions of the building. Originally the house may have had a widow's walk.
5. Alterations and additions: The house was restored and partially remodeled to serve as a house museum some time after 1958. Electric wiring, lighting fixtures, and an automatic sprinkling system were installed. The attic was remodeled to serve as living quarters for the curator and public toilets were added. Shutters enclosing both the front and rear second floor verandas were removed.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Captain John Geiger, who is assumed to have constructed the house, was a native of St. Augustine. He was one of the most famous pilots and wrecking masters during the early days in Key West.

Local legend holds that John James Audubon visited this house in 1832 when he came to the Florida Keys to paint local birds. Since Geiger did not acquire the property until 1844 it is highly unlikely that Audubon stayed in his house. In 1831 the property contained a one-story frame dwelling occupied by Dr. B.B. Strobel. It is possible that Audubon stayed there.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Photograph circa 1896 entitled "A Residence Embowered in Coconut Trees." In Crain, Horatio, Key West, Florida. Photgraveur, The Albertype Co. New York, 1896.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Monroe County Courthouse Records and Deedbooks, County Clerk's Office, Key West, Florida.

Sanborn Map of Key West, Florida, Sanborn Map Co. of New York, 1889.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Browne, Jefferson B., Key West, The Old and New, The Record Co. St. Augustine, Florida. pp. 15, 16, 162, 179, 180, 193, 224.

Shephard, Birse, Lore of the Wreckers, Beacon Press, Boston,  
1961. p. 209.

Prepared by: Betty M. Bruce  
Old Island Restoration  
Foundation, Inc.  
Project Historian  
HABS Key West Project  
July 1967

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: An excellent example of the mid-nineteenth century town houses of Key West. Characteristic architectural features include porches along the long dimensions of the building at both floor levels, exterior doorways from principal rooms at the first floor level, and cisterns located beneath wood decks at the rear of the house.
2. Condition of fabric: The fabric is in excellent condition, with minor modifications of the original.
3. Description of Exterior:
  1. Overall dimensions: A two-and-a-half story rectangular block 38'-1" x 40'-5".
  2. Foundation: Brick piers with cement wash, wood lath lattice panels between piers, painted green.
  3. Wall construction: Horizontal lapped wood siding 4 1/2" average exposure nailed over 1" thick horizontal siding; painted white.
  4. Structural system: Post and lintel, wood frame.
  5. Porches: First floor verandas extend along the long dimension of the building; 10 1/4" square porch columns (boxed) with 1 1/2" thick plinths, simple molded capitals; wood balustrade composed of molded hand rail, 1 1/8" square balusters, and bottom rail sloped to shed water; entablature above capitals of first floor veranda clearly articulate the second floor level. Porch floors of wood strips, sloped to exterior to shed water. Wood steps and balustrades at each side entrance. Wood deck over two cisterns at northeast side of house.

6. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors:

Southwest (front) doorway: Heavy surround; wood threshold; side-lights, three panes each with wood panel below; molded cornice; plinth blocks at cornice and at base; in-swinging double doors, each with two vertical panels and heavy drip boards at bottom. Doors are painted black.

Northeast (rear) doorway: Similar to front doorway, simple molded surround.

Side entrances, northwest and southeast: Molded cornice and surround, two one-panel doors per opening. Doors are varnished.

Second floor porch entrances: Two one-panel doors per opening into stair hall, in-swinging, heavy drip mold at base.

Second floor doorways between porches and end rooms: Two four-panel doors per opening (top three panels glazed), in-swinging, heavy drip boards at base.

b. Windows and shutters:

Six-over-six-light double hung sash. First floor shutters are solid with two panels each. Second and third floor shutters are louvered. The shutters are painted a dark green.

7. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: Gable roof, asbestos shingles, galvanized metal edging, gutters and downspouts.

b. Cornice, eaves: Boxed eaves and cornice at northeast and southwest elevations; no overhang at gable ends.

c. Dormers: Three gabled dormers each on southwest (front) and northeast (rear) elevations; flush siding in modified asbestos shingle covering.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

First floor: Entrance from the southwest porch to central stair hall, double sliding doors into living room; two doorways into dining room; living room and dining room each have a doorway to the exterior; doorway to northeast porch; stairway to second floor.

Second floor: Stair hall opens to northeast and southwest porches and to rooms on the northwest and southeast sides. Corner room opens onto porches.

Third floor: Stair hall; rooms to each side modified to accommodate curator's quarters and storage; crawl space between dormers.

2. Stairway: Stairway between first, second and third floors; straight runs, rounded hand rail, turned balusters, wood treads and risers, newels, miscellaneous iron braces and ties.
3. Flooring: Wood boards, averaging 4 1/2", stained brown.
4. Walls and ceiling finish: Plaster; molded wood chair rail, wood base-board; plaster centerpiece in ceiling of second floor stair hall.
5. Doorways and doors: Simple molded trim, modified crossette at upper corners of door trim, widening of surround trim at center of the double door opening between stair hall and living room; one two-panel door per opening except for double doorway where two three-panel (both sides) doors slide into pockets, brass guide in threshold.
6. Hardware: Original hardware throughout, porcelain doorknobs simulate marble, brass works, iron block lock at front door, pivoted key hole covers.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces southwest and is situated on the southeast corner of Whitehead and Greene Streets; a white picket fence parallels sidewalks and provides privacy for the house and gardens of informal planting of tropical foliage.
2. Outbuildings: An outhouse is located at the east corner of the property.

Prepared by: F. Blair Reeves, AIA  
Supervisory Architect  
HABS Key West Project  
July 1967

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared in 1967 during a summer project jointly sponsored by the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc. of Key West, and the Historic American Buildings Survey. Twenty-two structures were recorded, ranging from commercial structures, residences and hospitals to a convent, a lighthouse, and the Memorial to the Victims of the Disaster of the U.S. Battleship Maine.

The project was under the direction of F. Blair Reeves, AIA, Associate Professor, Department of Architecture, University of Florida. Measured drawings were prepared by student architects John D. Davenport and John F. Grimm of Texas A. and M. University, and John O. Crosby of the University of Florida. Mrs. Betty M. Bruce of the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc., and Professor Reeves were responsible for the historical and architectural data. They were assisted by members of the Foundation. J. Franks Brooks, Photographer, of Key West, supplied the photographs.